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DoD conducts largest Y2K test ever

By Paul Stone

FAIRFAX, Va. (AFPS)—It was actually July 13, 1999. But as far as the Pentagon was concerned the date was March 4, 2000, as DoD was wrapping up a test of the military's logistical systems in what was billed as the largest year 2000 test ever conducted.

The test involved more than 1,000 civilian and military personnel and DoD's 44 most critical logistics systems, spread out at more than 22 locations. It was designed to ensure year 2000 problems will not prevent delivery of supplies to troops as the millennium approaches.

The year 2000 problem, nicknamed "Y2K" and "millennium bug," refers to a past computer industry practice of programming years with just two digits—1999 would be "99." The shorthand means some computer systems and equipment on Jan. 1, 2000, might read "00" as "1900." The error could generate more inaccurate data and even cause systems to shut down. Systems that won't handle the year change correctly must be fixed or replaced; those that will work correctly are called "Y2K-compliant."

Test participants included the Office of the Secretary of Defense, Defense Logistics Agency, Defense Information Systems Agency, the U.S. Transportation Command and all four services. The Joint Interoperability Test Command provided independent verification and validation of the tests.

The 44 systems tested conduct about $80 billion worth of DoD business annually, said Zach Goldstein, DoD's director of logistics information systems. He said they process more 2.5 billion transactions—by some estimates, twice the electronic commerce conducted on the Internet by the rest of the entire country last year.

Goldstein said testing was vital because the systems support almost 2 million servicemembers and civilian employees by processing requests for almost everything from buttons to bullets, from food to spare parts. If servicemembers use it, shoot it, eat it or wear it, chances are it's ordered through the complex networks of computer systems tested.

During the tests, technical experts built a duplicate network often referred to as a "parallel processing environment." Then they rolled their computer clocks forward to simulate the week following Feb. 28, 2000.

Feb. 28 through March 1, 2000, are key Y2K dates because many computer programs were not written to recognize 2000 as a leap year. DoD has already successfully tested the systems for other key Y2K dates.

Goldstein called the tests the culmination of more than seven months of identifying problems, analyzing them and fixing the individual systems. "Now we're seeing how the systems work together, because that's how we do military operations," he said. Analysts were watching whether the systems communicated correctly during the date changes and whether they produced accurate information in their final data bases.

Although all results will not be in until later, only a few minor glitches have occurred thus far. DoD will release full results of the testing by the end of this month.